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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the direct relationship between curriculum, instruction, and evaluation, suggesting that following a national curriculum and preparing students to take national examinations requires diverse teaching materials, teaching methodologies, and testing techniques to train students to apply their cognitive skills to thinking, reasoning, and problem solving. The paper discusses diverse teaching strategies and techniques to follow in writing tests to prepare students for national examinations. Strategies include preparing lesson and unit plans; motivating students to learn; creating a climate for teaching; using textbook and curriculum guides effectively; using varied teaching skills; and maintaining classroom discipline. Suggestions for teaching writing skills include discussing themes and working with students in groups on those themes; providing a variety of reading materials that highlight different uses of English; and building on students' experiences. Teachers must control the difficulty and clarity of test items they write. Test structure and choice of test items should be conducive to learning, and every test item should be defensible. Three features of measurement are essential for ensuring instructional quality (e.g., repeated testing on material of comparable difficulty must recur over time, and measurement must incorporate valid indicators of the critical outcomes of instruction. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

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Jocelyne Hajj-Bahous

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National Testing and Diversity
Jocelyne Hajj-Bahous
Abstract

For years, educators in Canada, the United States and England have been debating the need for standardized tests to control the quality and standard of education. Although standardized achievement tests are based on a very broad curriculum, critics believe that they consist of form and content that impose constraints on the quality of assessment and limit the inferences that can be justifiably drawn from them. On the other hand, teacher-made tests may not control the quality of education and are subject to the teachers' expertise in writing test items.

A solution to this problem may be a national program and national testing, but this proposal too received strong criticism for having negative effects on both personal and national growth due to the constraints it places on diversity because students will all learn the same material at the same time.

This paper will focus on the direct relationship between curriculum, instruction, and evaluation. Thus, following the national curriculum and preparing students to sit for a national examination may necessitate the use of a diversity of teaching materials, teaching methodology, and testing techniques to train students to apply their cognitive skills to think, reason, and problem-solve.

In this paper, strategies that teachers apply in their classrooms and techniques they follow in writing their tests to prepare students for the national examination will be discussed with a specific emphasis on the diversity in methods of teaching and testing the writing skill.

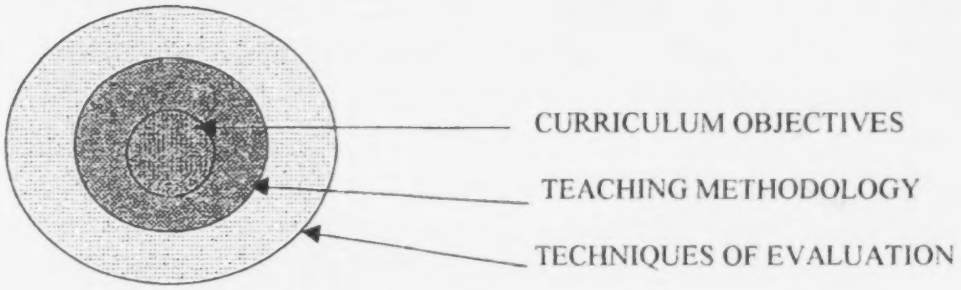
Parents, teachers, and administrators demand accountability in our educational system and call for high educational standards. Setting high educational standards is an easy task; however, achieving these standards is not always easy (Chase 1999). If teachers push the students too far to raise their standards, students will feel insecure for fear of inability to achieve the set standards and as a result, they will resent learning and may even drop out of their schools or boycot standardized tests, as hundreds of students did in Massachusetts in April 2000, when they marched to City Hall chanting, "Be a hero, take a zero!" (Smolkin, Sept. 10, 2000: 2). If, on the other hand, teachers go lenient and fail to present the students challenging tasks, students will be bored, and the result will be a generation of handicapped and unskilled adolescents unaware of the needs of their time and unable to cope with the rapid changes of an increasingly complex and competitive world.

National examinations, standardized tests and other forms of high stakes tests aim to provide all students equal learning opportunities. However, they have received strong criticism because they seem to encourage teaching to the test and limit students' creativity (Gutloff 1999). It is our duty as teachers, to use appropriate teaching methodology and develop our skills of writing tests to disprove such criticism.

In this paper, strategies that teachers apply in their classrooms and techniques they follow in writing their tests to prepare students for the national examination will be discussed. A particular focus will be given to the diversity in methods of teaching and testing the writing skill.

There is a direct relationship between the curriculum, teaching methodology, and techniques of evaluation. The curriculum represents the core educational requirements that students at different levels should achieve. The purpose of setting a national curriculum is to improve education, give it a structure, ensure its coherence, and promote its continuity while maintaining sufficient flexibility to guarantee progression in students' learning (The school curriculum). The objectives of a curriculum have to be continuously modified to meet the needs of the public. Since these objectives do not undergo significant changes on a yearly basis, teachers should consider instructional objectives as helpful guides and their modification as an update rather than a hindrance.

CURRICULUM—TEACHING METHODOLOGY—TECHNIQUES OF EVALUATION



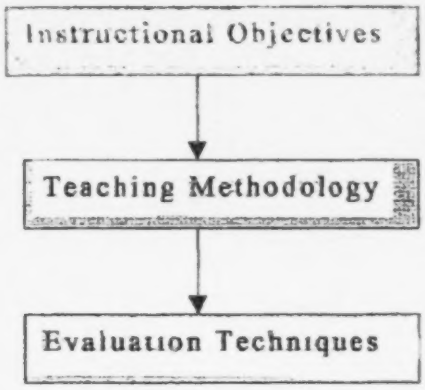
An instructional objective consists of 3 major components:

- the time limit (By the end of the academic year...)
- the students' behavior (students should be able to write a 100-word paragraph...)
- the degree of competence (with 80% accuracy...)

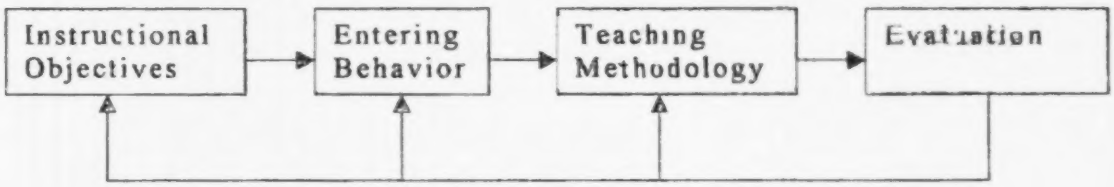
These components provide guidelines to help teachers focus on specific skills and behaviors required by the curriculum, evaluate students' performance, and give students helpful hints on how and what to study and how to improve their skills. Although writing involves so much subjectivity that it provides a serious threat when it appears as a major component of a national test, this need not be the case if curriculum designers set feasible objectives that teachers accept, adopt, and try their best to achieve. For example, whether the teachers apply the analytical or the holistic forms of evaluation, they are still going to focus on content, organization, development, sentence structure, diction, and mechanics. Instructional objectives help specify the criteria set for each class along with the degree of competence. This should not be considered by teachers as a burden but rather as a guideline to achieve their objectives and evaluate students' performance so as to minimize discrepancy between one teacher's expectations and grading system and those of another teacher. Teachers may draw achievement charts which they share with the students to provide them continuous feedback on their performance. Following is an example of an achievement chart that can be modified to match the teachers' objectives.

ACHIEVEMENT CHART							
	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
CONTENT							
originality							
details							
completeness							
ORGANIZATION							
coherence							
unity							
LANGUAGE							
subject-verb agreement							
tenses							
diction							
technical terms							
phrasal verbs							
MECHANICS							
punctuation							
comma splice							
capitalization							
proper nouns							

It is false to assume a linear relationship between instructional objectives, teaching methodology, and evaluation techniques, in the sense that there is one teaching methodology leading to a well-defined outcome.



It is rather better expressed with the Basic Teaching Model where continuous feedback modifies the different components.



The teaching methodology is as important as the instructional objectives. Without proper teaching methodology, instructional objectives cannot be assessed, our educational system as a whole fails to be accountable, and our evaluation will become unreliable and invalid. Along with a new curriculum, details concerning teaching methodology are usually given. Curriculum designers draw out a teaching methodology they believe is the most efficient means of achieving the objectives. This teaching methodology should serve as a guideline to the teachers to facilitate their work in class, but it should not constitute a burden. As a matter of fact, teachers should learn and benefit from the curriculum designers' expertise, but they should not be passive communicators of the information in the book. Teachers should not at all give up their right as decision makers when choosing activities, modifying tasks, and compiling supplementary material. Adopting a suitable teaching methodology is essential to achieving a high standard of education. Nevertheless, it is wrong to assume that there is one and only one teaching methodology to adopt.

Adopting a national curriculum does not imply rigidity in either teaching methodology or evaluation techniques. To ensure meeting individual students' needs, regardless of the skill or subject they are teaching, teachers are advised to follow these teaching strategies:

1. preparing lesson and unit plans

- Provide clear explanation so that students do not have to go back to their textbooks to understand the lesson.

2. motivating students to learn
   - Information has become so easy to access that many students do not feel the need to probe into unfamiliar fields since they can surf the web at any time and download the most updated articles.
   - Your duty as a teacher is to stimulate students' interest to learn because they want to learn, because they have to adapt to the needs of a continuously evolving community, and not because they have to pass an exam.
3. creating a climate for teaching
- Use a variety of teaching materials
- Use media and technology

4. using textbook and curriculum guides effectively
- Maintain the right to take decisions and choose what works best for your students

5. using a variety of teaching skills
   - In all cases, teach a skill rather than just content. As a result, students will learn to explore unfamiliar subject areas and thus retain information for a longer period of time.
6. maintaining classroom discipline
- Students learn best when classroom discipline is under control.

7. diagnosing student difficulties and adapting instruction to meet individual needs
- Make sure every student masters the skills required by the curriculum in his own way. (Naring 1990 cited in Campbell 1996)

Methods of teaching writing skills may vary. Many teachers may have experienced the fact that writing is an integral part of learning and many agree that learning to write cannot be conducted in isolated study skills lessons. Students cannot learn about writing-including topics as complex as communication strategy, logic and organization, document design, transitions, brevity, and style by just performing writing assignments. Students need to read about, discuss, practice; i.e. learn writing concepts before they can implement them (Munter, 1999).
Therefore, a few suggestions to methods of teaching the writing skill as context-dependent to match the concept of "situated learning" follow:

- Discuss a theme and work with students in groups on that theme.
- Provide a variety of reading materials that highlight the different ways English is used, especially those that help students understand society and culture.
- Introduce vocabulary that covers both the technical and every day meaning of key words.
- Reinforce patterns of language vital to understanding and expression, including language to express causality, chronology, exploration, logic, hypothesis, comparison, and argumentation.
- Build on students' experiences.
- Introduce the format as a means to serve the purpose of writing but not as an objective by itself (Wray and Lewis, 1997; Use of language across the curriculum).
- Develop students' awareness of the relevance of writing to their every day life. Throughout the writing process, enhance students' thinking skills so that students on individual basis develop their skills in information-processing, reasoning, enquiry, creative thinking, and evaluation. They may have to make small changes in an existing process, come up with

solutions, and revolutionize methods of achieving a solution (The school curriculum and the national curriculum: about key stages 1 and 2; Fatt, 2000).

These are only a few methods that can be applied when teaching writing. Teachers should keep in mind that they teach writing as a skill. Teachers may adopt the suggestions made by the curriculum designers regarding methodology and they may depend on a specific methodology adopted by their school (Brooks, 1991). No matter how specific or broad the curriculum is, there will always be a variety of methods of instruction to apply to achieve its specific objectives, and there will be even a wider variety of techniques of evaluation.

For instructional objectives to be better achieved, teachers have to know much more than what they teach so that they can cater to students' demands, answer challenging questions, provide supplementary activities, and offer clearer explanation. Similarly, students have to know much more than what they may be tested on so that they can support their ideas and convince the reader. It is the teachers' duty to control the difficulty and the clarity of the test items they write. Test items should be challenging enough to test how much students *know* rather than be puzzling, intriguing, and ambiguous so as to show how much students *do not know*.

Furthermore, teachers are afraid that if they do not coach students to answer the items as they would appear on a national exam, they will not have done a good job. This is a false assumption. As Grant Wiggins has noted, "Good teaching is inseparable from good assessing" (Cizek, 1995: 247). Also, Popham (1998: 384) stated that "if instructionally sound tests were built, those tests would have a positive impact on instruction. If instructionally unsound tests were built, those tests would have a negative impact on instruction." Therefore, teachers should not refrain from being creative simply because the material is limited, the teaching methodology designed, the activities assigned, and the time limited. It is the teachers' job to make sure that they provide necessary material, apply appropriate teaching methodology, encourage student interaction, and teach students to explore both familiar and unfamiliar subject areas for the sole purpose of learning. If teachers provide the students a meaningful learning experience and teach them the skill to explore the subject matter to the fullest, learn how to tackle problems, and find logical solutions, the teachers' job to evaluate students' writing skills becomes much easier.

Teachers should be creative with assessment, but to do so, they should have a good grasp of both the context within which they are operating and the problems they are trying to solve. Gutloff (1999:4) makes sure basic skills are not left out of the curriculum. She teaches the essential elements of good persuasive writing, but she does a lot of it within the format of the test. Therefore, both the structure of the test and the choice of test items should be conducive to learning.

Every item included on the test should be defensible.

- It should have a clear objective.
- It should be properly and clearly worded.
- It should be an application of an appropriate testing technique.
- It should yield reliable and valid results.
- It should present a learning tool that students will retain in their long term memory. In other words, test items should be meaningful.

Three features of measurement are essential for ensuring instructional utility.

1. Repeated testing on material of comparable difficulty must recur over time.
2. Measurement must incorporate valid indicators of the critical outcomes of instruction.

3. The database must permit quantitative and qualitative descriptions of student performance to determine when and how instruction should be adapted (Fuchs and Deno, 1994).

Inasmuch as summative evaluation in the form of national testing affects the teachers' teaching methodology and formative evaluation, their teaching methodology and formative evaluation — when well applied— shape summative evaluation (Ashcroft and James 1999).

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